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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ARMY MINE ACTION EFFORTS STALL IN
UNCERTAIN SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

REF: COLOMBO 1140

This message is sensitive but unclassified.

11. (U) Summary: December 2006 marks the end of the four-year, eight million dollar USG-RONCO contract in Sri Lanka which has successfully trained a Sri Lanka Army humanitarian mine action unit of nearly 600 deminers and mine detection dog handlers. On November 3, SLA mine action coordinator Brigadier Chrishantha de Silva told us that without continued support by expatriate technical advisors at demining sites in the north and east, the SLA would lack credibility with the Tamil population and possibly risk being targeted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Poloff and RONCO head of mission countered that the program has largely completed its mandate to build indigenous capacity. We emphasized the opportunity to institutionalize the SLA mine action program by consolidating and restarting clearance activities and suggested pursuing integration into the Ministry for Nation Building and Estate Development as a civilian mine clearance unit. Meanwhile, the U.S.-based Humpty Dumpty Institute has agreed to fund the HALO Trust and Land O Lakes in Jaffna in an innovative mine clearance and dairy development initiative. End Summary.

Other Commitments for Deminers

12. (SBU) On November 3, Sri Lanka Army Engineers Mine Action Coordinator Brigadier Chrishantha de Silva outlined for poloff the effect of the prevailing insecurity on the Government of Sri Lanka's (GSL) demining efforts. De Silva said he had visited SLA Jaffna Headquarters the previous week to request that Jaffna Commander Major General Chandrasiri release some Army Engineers for humanitarian demining tasks. De Silva lamented: "I saw the military's immense responsibilities in Jaffna, and I couldn't convince him. General Chandrasiri promised me that the moment there is a respite (in the fighting) he will release 30 deminers to work in Jaffna and the east." The Brigadier noted the security situation had forced a delay in refresher training for SLA

deminers in Embilapitiya scheduled for November.

¶3. (SBU) The SLA is currently involved in military demining along the Jaffna Forward Defense Line and in the eastern Trincomalee district following recent clashes with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during which the LTTE laid new anti-personnel mines. RONCO training has brought SLA military demining "up to international humanitarian standards," de Silva said, though not for humanitarian purposes. The Brigadier noted, "Though we may not open the A9 highway (connecting the Jaffna peninsula to the rest of the island through the LTTE-controlled Vanni), clearing mines there will help facilitate moving civilians eventually, as well as troops." The Brigadier assessed that the SLA will be able to step up mine action efforts in the east before it can resume in Jaffna.

Expatriate Enablers

¶4. (U) USG contractor RONCO suspended Colombo-based operations in Sri Lanka at the end of October at the onset of the rainy season. The contract was due to end in December 2006; the suspension and departure of expatriate technical advisors and Colombo-based director Fredrik Palsson will allow remaining contract money to be conserved to address problems in the Mine Detection Dog (MDD) program. This has suffered, in part because SLA dog handlers are periodically assigned temporary duty away from mine action. RONCO's MDD program trainer will remain in country for up to six weeks more under the contract.

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¶5. (SBU) As he did during PM/WRA officer Deborah Netland's visit in July-August 2006, the Brigadier lamented that without RONCO, the SLA would not have the credibility lent by expatriate Technical Advisor presence. He opined: "We're doing humanitarian work, but we're a party to the conflict. HALO Trust and Danish Demining Group (the two demining agencies operating in Jaffna) use expatriates at every site, so they have no problem with either side (the LTTE or the security forces)."

¶6. (SBU) Brigadier de Silva repeatedly emphasized in his November 3 meeting with poloff and RONCO Chief of Party Fredrick Palsson that "the GSL is committed to the mine action program and to the SLA leading it." Lowering his tone, however, he added: "Frankly, my worry is that the SLA mine action program will die a natural death. We're working in areas of confrontation (between Tamil and Sinhalese civilians). The presence of expatriates builds confidence in conflict situations." He claimed that LTTE cadres had fired on SLA deminers in the eastern area of Welikanda (near Trincomalee) in September, forcing them to abandon work at the site.

¶7. (U) In the absence of expatriate technical advisors as RONCO completes its four-year, \$8 million USG contract in Sri Lanka, de Silva requested that the Ambassador and other embassy officials make frequent, well publicized visits to demining sites in Jaffna, Vavuniya and the east to lend credibility to the SLA's humanitarian efforts.

Pushing the Bird from the Nest

¶8. (U) RONCO Chief of Party Fredrik Palsson expressed his satisfaction "with what we have achieved together in building Sri Lanka's capacity for humanitarian demining." Poloff emphasized to the Brigadier that the suspension period provides an opportunity for the Government of Sri Lanka and the Army to show the Department of State that the GSL is committed to institutionalizing its humanitarian mine action program. The rainy season can provide an opportunity for the SLA to consolidate, refresh and restart its clearance

activities and/or begin to integrate into the Ministry for Nation Building and Estate Development. A national civilian demining program could tap substantial Japanese donor money, which under Japanese law cannot go to a military entity.

Mines for Milk

¶9. (U) As the Sri Lanka Army demining unit faces logistical challenges, another US-based initiative seeks to augment confidence building and development efforts among Tamil populations in Sri Lanka. In October, representatives from the U.S. NGO Humpty Dumpty Institute (HDI) and dairy giant Land O Lakes visited Colombo to meet with the Embassy and finalize a two-part mine clearance/ dairy development project for the Jaffna peninsula. By monetizing red lentils donated by USDA, HDI will fund mine clearance by the HALO Trust. Land O Lakes will then partner with local Sri Lankan dairy companies to develop small-scale pasteurization facilities on cleared land. As many Jaffna residents own one or more milk cows, HDI and Land O Lakes hope to utilize existing livestock to develop a dairy cooperative on the Jaffna peninsula. The co-op could market its products in Jaffna and island-wide, contributing to much-needed economic development of the north.

¶10. (U) Despite the fluctuating security environment in the north and east, we support the continuation of the program in conflict-affected Jaffna (rather than in predominantly Sinhalese Anuradhapura) to extend our outreach to Tamil civilians, as Ambassador noted in an October 5 meeting with

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HDI president Ralf Cwerman. HDI and Land O Lakes intend to establish a joint office in Colombo by early 2007. The HALO Trust is already utilizing HDI funds for ongoing mine clearance in Jaffna.

Capacity-Building, Not Dependence-Building

¶11. (SBU) Comment: It is not surprising that the SLA is protesting the suspension of on-the-ground expatriate support through RONCO, despite having known from the onset the program was meant to build Sri Lanka's indigenous demining capacity. The current security environment has led Sri Lanka's under-funded military to recommit soldiers trained in demining to the battlefield. However, the onus rests on the Government of Sri Lanka to utilize the resources we have provided to strengthen and institutionalize its mine action program as a crucial confidence building measure for its citizens. Meanwhile, the HDI/HALO/Land O Lakes project highlights how the U.S. private sector can step in to address humanitarian needs.

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